

Translocation of Rhinos within Assam : A successful third round of the second phase of translocations under Indian Rhino Vision (IRV) 2020

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Introduction

The conservation of the Great Indian One horned Rhino (*rhinoceros unicornis*) is being regarded as the epitome of conservation movement in the country and Assam in particular. Assam is also regarded as the last stronghold of the Indian Rhino with more than 2000 rhinos in the wild. Planned initiative in terms of rhino conservation in Assam by the Department of Forest with the help and support of many agencies including local populace made it possible to build up the population of rhinos to 2048 in Kaziranga National Park, 64 in Orang National Park, 84 in Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary (Census, 2009) and 5 rhinos are also found in Manas NP of which two were introduced through wild to wild translocations and three were introduced under the rehabilitation program. While the successes in conservation of rhino was achieved in the above mentioned three protected areas, loss and subsequent extermination of rhino by poachers were witnessed in the other rhino bearing areas like Laokhowa-Burachapori Wildlife Sanctuary during the social unrest in early 1980's and in Manas National Park during the social unrest in 1990's failing all attempts made by the concerned department to protect those.

The conservation of rhinos specifically in Assam and India in general has been a great success looking into the population figures and trends. However the population is confined to only limited areas and more than 90% of the population is found in Kaziranga NP alone which is not quite healthy. For long term conservation of the species, the Indian Rhino Vision 2020 (IRV2020) has been designed which is a joint program of the Department of Environment and Forests, Government of Assam, World Wide Fund for Nature – India (WWF-India) and the International Rhino Foundation (IRF). The US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the Bodoland Territorial Council and a host of other organizations from different parts of the globe are extending support to the program that aims to increase the rhino population in Assam from about 2000 (in 2005) to 3000 by the year 2020 distributed over seven Protected Areas (PAs) of the state.

Range expansion through wild to wild translocations is one of the prime components of the IRV2020 program and four rhinos from Pobitora WLS have been already successfully translocated to Manas NP in April 2008 and December 2010.

To execute the translocation operations and to co-ordinate all activities related to translocation the Task Force for Translocation of Rhinos within Assam re-constituted a “**Translocation Core Committee (TCC)**” on 28th February 2011, headed by Dr. S.P. Singh (IFS, CCF-WL) as the Chief Operations Officer (COO) and Mr. Amit Sharma (WWF) as the Deputy COO . The other members in the committee are Dr. Bibhab K. Talukdar (Aaranyak), FDTP Manas, Director Kaziranga NP and DFO Guwahati WL Division.

The Translocation Operation

The process of translocation can be divided into three distinct stages depending on the type of activities to be accomplished and each very crucial, viz., - the preparatory stage; the implementation stage and the post-release stage.

A. PREPARATORY STAGE: All the preparatory works were completed by December 2011 as necessary plans for the translocations were done almost three to four months in advance of the dry period in Assam. After the successful completion of the previous rounds of translocations, the TCC and its sub-teams assessed the gaps and the needs and planned accordingly. A few items like crates, sledges, ramps, etc that got damaged during operation were either replaced or repaired and strengthened as found necessary. The capture site for this round i.e.- Pobitora WLS for a change this time was more wet compared to the earlier rounds and the grasses were taller than before which was a challenge for the team. A team from the TCC assessed the capture feasibility in the park a couple of days in advance of the actual operation and selected two areas where the field conditions were found to be suitable for the capture operations. Following this a team was involved in the monitoring of the rhinos for a couple of days to figure out if the area had a suitable rhino population to be captured. Sufficient suitable rhino were found to be using the tentatively selected areas and the capture dates and plans were finalized accordingly for the operation. All necessary arrangements were in place and the teams were ready within the stipulated time frame.

B. IMPLEMENTATION STAGE: This stage includes locating the rhinos of suitable age and sex, capturing, transporting and then releasing the rhinos in the destination.

The third round of translocations under the second phase was fixed to be conducted during 7th to 9th January 2012. After the last round of translocations, the crates, sledges and other equipments were maintained and kept ready at the Assam State Zoo, on 7th January 2012, all the necessary were loaded onto the trucks under the supervision of the logistics team and dispatched to reach Pobitora by about 7.00PM. Briefing of the field staff and support staff and strategies were discussed in the evening and all preparations were given a final touch. The trucks with crates, cranes, excavators, etc all reached the capture site by the evening and as per the strategy devised they were positioned in the Haduk area of the sanctuary.

On the day of actual capture i.e. – 8th Jan., 2012 at Pobitora WLS, the area was cordoned off and full security cover was provided by the personnel's of the Assam Police department. The preparatory works that also included the search for the rhinos started at about 7.30AM when visibility was good from the Tuplung camp. On receiving information of rhinos in the Pagladoba area the veterinarians along with rhino identifiers started the move on the back of the departmental elephants at about 8.00AM. The aim was to capture two sub-adult rhinos preferably females for a population of 10 rhinos from Pobitora WLS as the founder population at Manas NP. The rhinos were giving a real tough time and after a bit of effort in the Pagladoba area, one sub-adult female rhino could be zeroed upon and darted at about 9.45AM. The rhino got fully immobilized and collapsed to the ground at about 9.55AM and was confirmed to be a female of probably less than 10 years of age. After the regular post-veterinary protocols, fitting of the radio collar and ear notching the rhino the logistics team moved in with excavator, tractor, labors, trucks and crates for the rest of the procedures. The sledge was placed appropriately adjoining the rhino after digging the ground as per the necessary specifications. The rhino was then rolled on to the sledge with the help of ropes and then it was pulled towards the open doors of the crate. After aligning the sledge with the

crate, it was pulled inside over the ramp with the help of an excavator steered by experienced persons taking all care not to injure anyone during the tricky operations. After the sledge with the rhino was put inside the crate the doors of the crate was pulled down using the innovative chain-pulley mechanism. One side was fully closed and the other side was open at minimum levels for the application of the reversal. On the application of the reversal, the rhino was up in its feet in about a minute's time and the sledge was pulled out and simultaneously the door was fully closed and reinforced with the iron bar locking systems. The move to crate the rhino was over by about 11.00AM and then was loaded onto the truck by about 11.20AM. The first team comprising the veterinarians and locators took a brief break and thereafter went out in the same area for a second rhino however no suitable rhino could be found searching for about 30 minutes. The entire team returned to the base camp at Tuplung and discussed the next plan of action. After planning and strategizing it was decided that a small team with the veterinarians, rhino identifiers and a few support staff move to the second location near Jugdol – Pipolati on vehicles. A few probable rhinos were quickly sighted in the Pipolati area and the capture moves were initiated around 12.30PM by calling for the elephants. In the meantime the rest of the team along with the logistics team also followed slowly to nearest station, Haduk camp so that on any information support can be provided in the shortest possible time. After a number of efforts, one rhino an adult female (probably about 10 years of age) successfully darted around 1.00PM and the rhino was fully immobilized after a long duration of about 15 minutes. Thereafter post-darting activities were carried out by the veterinarians following the standard protocol, a VHF radio collar was fitted and ear notching was done numbering ten and thereafter the logistics team moved in for the rest of the process to crate it that was completed by about 2.45PM. The process of loading was completed by around 3.10PM and the team returned to the base camp after completing the quota of two rhinos. The trucks with the crated rhinos were parked in shaded areas for optimum comfort and the rhinos were monitored by the veterinarians. Watering was done at regular intervals as advised by the veterinarians and was not much as the temperatures were cool and quite comfortable. The crate doors were locked and the keys were handed over to the Leader of the Transport team by the Leader of the Capture team for transporting the rhinos to Manas.



Plate1 – Preparations in progress



Plate2 – The team at the base camp

The movement of the rhinos in convoy started from Pobitora WLS at about 5.00PM in the evening to Manas NP under the supervision of a dedicated team. A Police escort vehicle with led the convoy with the rhinos, and the traffic of cities and towns was regulated throughout the journey by the police to make way for the convoy to pass by. The transportation route followed was the same as the earlier ones via Chandrapur-Narangi-VIP road-Khanapara and NH-37. En-route weighing of the trucks with the empty crates as well as the fully loaded

truck was done in the same station to obtain the weight of the respective rhinos. The rhinos weighed 1400 kgs and 1650 kgs. respectively. The distance of 240 kms from Pobitora WLS to Manas NP was covered in about ten hours due to slow movement of vehicles in the interest of comfort and safety of the rhinos. The veterinary team kept monitoring the rhinos at regular intervals and water was poured over them periodically. The convoy of vehicles carrying the stopped at pre-arranged areas for food and rest and ultimately reached Basbari, Manas NP at about 3.00AM.



Plate 3 & 4 – Part of the Pobitora Capture team

On the convoy reaching Manas the release team under the leadership of FDTP Manas took over charge and made all the necessary arrangements for the release. The two trucks with the rhinos were taken inside for release in the interior area near Buraburijhar camp where the rhinos were released during the previous rounds. Here two ramps were prepared for parking the trucks for the release of two rhinos simultaneously. The rhinos were transported with their face towards the front and so at the time of release the crates were downloaded with the help of a crane so that the rhino's could come out easily with their face towards the front. The keys to the lock of the crates were handed over to the Leader of the Manas team jointly by the Leader of the Transport team and Forest Range Officer, Pobitora WLS. The crate door for the first rhino was opened at about 8.30AM. The rhinos were applied with mild sedation and it walked out in the north-eastern direction quite soon without much delay. The door for the next rhino was similarly opened at about 9.00AM, this rhinos was a bit bigger and more aggressive, and it took a few rounds of the release site providing each one observing a nice view, attacked the crane once and went off to the grasslands in a northern direction. Thereafter the released rhinos were monitored closely by the monitoring team. Both the rhinos had only superficial injuries at the time of release and necessary medication was applied prior to their release in the wild.

The rhinos were accompanied by the Forest Range officer of Pobitora WLS along with a couple of staff and about 15 youths from the fringe of the sanctuary. All of them were very happy to see the rhino's safely released in Manas.

C. POST-RELEASE STAGE: This stage involves regular monitoring, patrolling and protection of the released rhinos in Manas NP. The field monitoring team at present comprises of foresters, forest Guards staff assisted by home guards and volunteers, technically supported by a team from WWF-India works under the experienced leadership of FDTP Manas. The staff is now well experienced and trained in the various post-release activities.



Plate5 – Rhino10 getting released



Plate6 – Part of the Manas Release team

Both the rhinos post-release were observed to have settled down by the evening in the central parts of the Basbari range after the initial excitement during the release. Rhino9 though initially moved towards the north-east from its crate thereafter went south turned eastwards and settled down in the Burimara area for the day and towards the evening reached further south close to the 2nd gate area and then settled down in the Rhino camp area for the night. The other Rhino10 went north after release, probably spent most the time in the Bura Buri area and in the afternoon moved towards the Kuribeel area and returned back to the Bura Buri area in the evening. Post-three days of the release the rhinos are generally seen to be exploring the areas occupied by the other rhinos in the central parts of the Basbari range specially in and around Bura Buri and Kuribeel. Unlike the first two rhinos released in Manas the present set of rhinos did not run around for a long distance and the average distance covered during the first twenty-four hours is about 3kms. from the release site.

Conclusion

The release of these two rhinos completed the planned quota of ten rhinos from Pobitora to Manas NP. The operations went off quite smoothly in all the rounds from Pobitora WLS and the team is up-beat and all are looking forward to translocate the next batch of rhinos which will be the first from Kaziranga NP by the next month. The rhinos released in Manas NP are doing well and it is expected that all these efforts will go a long way in taking forward the conservation measures in the park and in the revival of its glory.

The Translocation Core Committee headed by Mr. S.P. Singh as Chief Operation Officer takes the opportunity to thank and acknowledge the help offered by all including the local community and the media who have directly or indirectly contributing to the success of the second round of the second phase of the translocations under the IRV 2020 Program.

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